

The art of questioning and listening

No matter what their specific role, most business owners need to be able to sell. There are many myths associated with selling, one of the biggest being that it takes the 'gift of the gab' to succeed. The reality is that being a good listener is far more important than being a good talker.

As Stoic philosopher Epictetus (55-135 AD) observed, "We have two ears and one mouth so that we can listen twice as much as we speak." Effective listening is driven by attitude, rather than technique; it is much easier to really listen and take in what the other person is saying if you are genuinely interested.

Only by asking questions and listening carefully will you discover the prospective client's real needs. If you have ever been at the receiving end of a poorly trained kitchen or double-glazing salesman, you will know how it feels to be talked at and sold to when you would prefer the salesman to ask the right questions, listen to your specific requirements and check that he

understands them correctly, before proposing a solution. Good and insightful questions will also demonstrate to the client that you know what you are talking about, and this ultimately increases confidence in your ability as well as building trust and rapport.

**"He who asks
is a fool for five minutes,
but he who does not ask
remains a fool forever."**

Chinese proverb

Questioning is an important part of the information gathering process in selling. As one Chinese proverb goes, "He who asks is a fool for five minutes, but he who does not ask remains a fool forever."

The purpose of questions is to seek specific answers, clarify information, and keep the dialogue on track. By definition, all questions are direct or indirect, open or leading. In a sales context, direct questions are used where you are happy for your client to know the purpose

behind them. Indirect questions, on the other hand, may be used when you fear that the client's subjective attitude to your question might prejudice his answer.

Open questions elicit a qualitative response, and the interrogative pronouns used to frame them are immortalised in the poem that follows Rudyard Kipling's "Elephant's Child":

*I keep six honest serving men
(They taught me all I knew);
Their names are What and Why and When
And How and Where and Who.*

Leading or closed questions expect yes/no or quantitative answers; they are manipulative and are largely used for control. All these types of question have their place at various stages of the sales cycle.

A good listener summarises or reflects back what he has heard, without evaluating or interpreting it. The benefit of this approach is that the speaker knows that the listener has heard and is taking time to understand fully before responding.

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yes!

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